

A CONVERSATION WITH JAAN VALSINER

Interviewed by

Elli Marie Tragel

Tartu, May 7th 2022. Toome cafe's terrace by the tennis courts.

Elli Marie Tragel: *We are now at the end of your time here at the University of Tartu as an Expatriate Estonian visiting professor¹. Yesterday [May 6th, 2022], in our last seminar of the course [Semiosis in Irreversible Time²], you encouraged students to put a lot of thought into the first and the last sentence of their writing. If you were to write about your time here in Tartu this past year, how would you start?*

Jaan Valsiner: When I drove into Tartu and entered into Tähtvere, I felt weirdly at home and, at the same time, not at all. Weirdly at home because I would expect Tartu to be home—it was home for me for eight years in the 1970s. The weird part is, Tartu looks so familiar and at the same time completely non-familiar. I'm not even speaking of the town centre or the area near the bus station, which is completely new. Even the old Tähtvere seemed strangely unfamiliar, although it is almost like it was then. And then I got lost driving into town. Somewhat sad for me to get lost in my hometown, but I did.

EMT: *In "Hyper-Generalization by the Human Mind"³ you point out that the focus of the cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics is on the UPconscious rather than the UNconscious, which for example, psychoanalysis focuses on. Neither upconscious nor unconscious are verbally expressible. In the way you described your experience just now, are you "translating" the UPconscious? Perhaps you could elaborate on the idea of upconscious a little bit?*

¹ <https://ut.ee/en/content/university-tartu-scholarship-expatriate-estonian-visiting-professors-granted-jaan-valsiner> 01.12.2020

² <https://ut.ee/en/content/expatriate-estonian-visiting-professor-jaan-valsiner-teaches-course-semiosis-irreversible> 09.09.2021

³ Hyper-generalization by the human mind: The role of sign hierarchies in meaning-making processes. Psychosozial Verlag, 2021

JV: Yes, if we think of it, I have been away from Tartu for more or less three years after a very short visit in 2017. Now I came for nine months — back for nine months to a town which was home for me for eight years. You feel differently about the road from Tallinn to Tartu. And then you arrive. It's almost like an end of a pilgrimage. One hundred eighty kilometres is similar to the road to Santiago de Compostela. You have expectations that are not verbalised, but they are deeply built on all of your life experience over the last 40 years outside of Estonia and, before that, 29 years inside Estonia. They are not verbalised. I am feeling a strange recognition of familiarity and non-familiarity at the same time. In the theoretical sense, unconscious means effectively overgeneralised sign-fields — that are linked with semiotics. The only thing I do differently [from general semiotics] is to make signs into sign-fields. I make them hyper-generalised at two moments, nothing more. I then consider that these sign-fields that we all carry with us in our lives come from our experience, we've set up certain expectations for the next moment of arrival or departure from a particular place. That is more or less what happened on my way to Tartu. In general, I'm claiming — and this is now a very strong theoretical claim — that most of human subjectivity is built out of these hyper-generalised fields. It can be translated into some verbal expression, yes, but such expression will never completely characterise what is in that highest level of unconscious. It's a read-out from the unconscious, but only a specific read-out here and now for specific purposes. For example, if somebody asks you what kind of person you are, I say I'm a happy person. This statement happy person is completely empty, because you cannot verify it in any way. I can say that because it comes out to my unconscious, but nobody else can understand what I mean by that. They accept it because it's a socially acceptable statement (it need not always be socially acceptable).

EMT: *Often, we have unconscious habits, habits of doing, thinking, and so on. How would you describe habits in relation to the unconscious?*

JV: In terms of unconscious, Freud would have answers, I don't. In terms of unconscious we can see habit when you have hyper-generalised a particular aspect of very ordinary activities or very ordinary phenomena. For example, feeling into nature. Feeling into nature is something that comes with us through childhood or adolescence. The feeling into nature leads to different feelings here and now in the nice spring—finally!—and very specific statements about that nice spring, such as trees are becoming green. This is an objective statement about the trees, but the way I'm making that statement comes out of my unconscious of feeling into the nature and waiting for the spring to come. Now it is here, and I make the simple comment trees are getting green. For everybody else, this is simply a statement of the obvious. For me, that simple statement is actually the expression of the affective appreciation of spring arriving.

EMT: *It has the aspect of change in it already: we appreciate it because it's becoming now and it wasn't before.*

JV: Yes, and it is anticipated, desired. I looked out my window in the winter seeing ice and ice and more ice, and my anticipation for spring was growing. There was no spring. Finally, it comes and then I make a trivial comment: trees are becoming green.

EMT: *Anticipation is forward-oriented. As you say: semiosis is forward-oriented.*

JV: Yes, that is exactly the point. I make a statement that is oriented forward. When I say trees are getting green, I anticipate that they get even greener and everything gets warmer, and so on, and summer will come. But all of it is not expressed in my little statement implied by the feeling that goes back to the hyper-generalised form that nature is changing, nature is becoming and so on. There is no way back to the winter before the next winter. I have a Norwegian friend who becomes positively ecstatic when snow comes. He is so happy when the snow starts to fall. Cannot but jump into the snow. I understand his sentiment based on the background, but I cannot enter his background of hyper-generalised feeling with the same focus on snow.

EMT: *From this description, I hear an aspect present in all your theoretical approaches: the emphasis on irreversible time.*

JV: Yes, and affect, both ways. Affective primacy of all our mental functions. Affective over-cognition — not the other way around. And it all happens in irreversible time. The mechanisms are semiotic. Semiosis comes into it exactly at the intersection of affect and cognition—and at an intersection of the future and the past.

EMT: *Why is it so important to emphasise irreversible time?*

JV: In terms of theory, it was just a lucky discovery of Henri Bergson's notion of irreversible time and taking it seriously, and also wrongly, because my version is actually the opposite of Bergson's. So that's the technical side of the past history of how I invented it or came to it. Now, the more subjective side. I reached that [emphasis on irreversible time], maybe somewhere in the move out of Estonia in 1980. Before that, I was feeling very depressed for about two years. This interfered with everything. I couldn't finish my doctoral thesis at that time fully. Fortunately, I finally did it, but I was very depressed. It seemed meaningless to

do what I was doing. It seemed I had no future in the then Soviet Estonia and the lifeworld of academics, despite the fact that I was supposedly considered to be very promising, but I didn't feel promising in any sense. So, the nasty idea of leaving the Soviet Union came to me, but there was no way to get out at that time. We make all kinds of ideal stories, and none of them are realistic. So the depression grows, and so on, and so forth. Finally, I could get out, by coincidence, basically. I remember very clearly January 13th, 1980, standing in the back of the big ship that took all the tourists to Helsinki, looking at the view of Tallinn disappearing into the darkness, thinking that I will never see this place again. Slow distancing from home, hometown, home country. And this was a very strong experience. I can still feel that experience of departure. Very ambivalent. On the one hand, I'm getting out. Getting out of not only my state, but also my depressive stance. On the other hand, I don't know where I'm going, but it did not really matter. I knew that 'I'm going ahead'. The future orientation was unquestionable, but totally unclear. The past was being lost together with my home country, town and so on, but at the same time, it was exactly what I had wanted, so it was not that I'm now losing everything. I'm losing in order to gain. And if you look carefully into my theories which emerged maybe 15-20 years later, this kind of past-to-future move is already in that particular experience of departure from Estonia. It was exactly thematic because this was seen at that time as irreversible. Fourteen years later, I was back in independent Estonia, but also in a very cautious way. I didn't rush to come back after 1991. Most exiled Estonians were happy to come back to teach Estonians how to be democratic. They failed because American democracy is not the same as Estonians gaining independence. There was a big difference between them. Well, I didn't rush back, I came two years later. I think when I came to Tallinn then I had somewhat similar feelings as I described about coming to Tartu now. So maybe the irreversible time comes from my personal experiences of exiting and entering. Maybe that's the background, I've never analysed it. It's the first time I'm trying to put it into words.

EMT: *This year, on Estonian Independence Day [February 24th, 2022], Russia started a war in Ukraine. How have you been feeling here in this context?*

JV: First of all, enormous internal anxiety and anger about that kind of change in the Russian case, which I did not expect. I was assuming Russia was politically more rational. Even on the day before the actual invasion, I still thought that what was going on was an effort to show power to divide Europe, which was obviously one of the political goals of Russia. I was wrong. They invaded, the war started — later failing, which is very good. I am anxious about the enormous loss to everything that this brought not only to Ukraine, but to Estonia, for example, and to that part of Russia, which is not nationalistic. A very big part of the Russians

are against this particular act, but they have no freedom to say that. What is happening very quickly is a return to what I remember from Russia in the 1970s where everybody would speak through anecdotes. After 1991, anecdotes disappeared in Russia, and now they're reappearing again. People can't say anything directly, they will use anecdotes for expression. And of course, this is a tragedy for those Russians who have either built up something of their own in relation to the West. This includes even oligarchs, because they are losing much of the international business side. It includes people who are deeply linked with the two countries: people who are living in one country and working in another, people who live in St. Petersburg and go to the Estonian church (which now is probably being closed down) and so on. There are many very specific personal aspects touched by this change, not to speak of the enormous sacrifices made from the Ukrainian side. It's something that you can feel into very deeply, and then you start to develop all kinds of cognitive interests. This morning I was actually studying a particular period of Russian history: 1796–1801, which was a period of the tsar Paul I. Paul I was only tsar for four years, until he was assassinated. Quite obviously I was looking for a scenario where assassination could happen in 2022... which is unlikely, but still you think of it, because in Russian history changing of the tsar has not been unusual. But more interesting is a question of what was problematic for Paul I: he was about to join with Napoleon to try to capture India. India, of course, was part of the British East India Company. So the British were the ones who would then start to fight diplomatically against Russia. Turns out that the British ambassador to St. Petersburg at the time was directly involved in the tsar's assassination. The question of dividing political power zones was present in the 19th century, very much a negotiation of "you take this, you take that" between Napoleon, Russia and so on. This is more or less what is happening now. The fight about which country belongs to which powers is a continuity over 200–300 years. This is very disconcerting, very horrifying. It goes on and on. It may change one way, find some temporary solutions. And another way. All the fears of Estonia about Russia potentially being dangerous are very serious. It's not just that Estonia is something to capture, Estonia is simply part of the question of to which the power goes to. And this has nothing to do with people. People live their ordinary life, but somewhere there is this big "game-making" between the politicians that start to make the impact on ordinary people very directly from life and death, and ending wellbeing in ordinary life. Very, very difficult feeling in a way.

EMT: *How can we as semioticians and cultural psychologists help with this?*

JV: Well, first of all, probably, to neutralise propaganda. Nowadays so much becomes a war of propaganda. War, more than ever before, becomes a problem of social media. To neutralise oneself from that, and literally see through the

information from the enormous power of suggestion that is around us. This means basically that one should not always take very specific political invitations seriously. In my case, this refers to Russian propaganda, because I have been looking at some of it in the past years. The image I had of it is that they had used all the Soviet era propaganda, plus learned everything from the West about how to make propaganda. So, not only political statements, but an old babushka making a very emotional claim about something is utilised in propaganda. All levels from very personal, very ordinary to hyper-political are used in the propaganda. The moment there is something to use, they use it. That is very dangerous because it creates, in psychology, particularly introduced by Kurt Lewine, a situation where the person has no exit. A person cannot leave the field of this kind of propaganda. If I leave it on the political side, I'm deeply impressed by the babushka trying to tell some personal story, which works in the direction of propaganda. The only way not to be captured by the propaganda is to neutralise it, to create a barrier against the propaganda as a whole. For example, this is when my American colleagues ask, how do you counter the effect of television on young people or yourself? My answer is very simple: just don't have a television or turn it off. It's not necessary. How can you do that, you have no news? Well, let's think carefully. What is the news these days? What do we know from the news? We know only these particular aspects that are highlighted by whoever makes the news. We do not know the continuity of some stories somewhere else. For example, I learned yesterday that in Turkmenistan on March 17th, a new president was inaugurated⁴: a 40-year-old man who is the son of the previous president. Not surprisingly he "won" the presidential election in very much the style that we know from the Soviet era. Most importantly, what happened when he was inaugurated? The first foreign diplomat whom he accepted was an Afghanistani Taliban representative. You see this very specific, very relevant piece of information because this tells us about the diplomatic outreach from Afghanistan outside and towards the Russian Empire, so to say. But we have completely overlooked this in the middle of all the concerns about Ukraine. This is equally dangerous as the war in Ukraine, because it is definitely expanding the particular Islamic militancy towards the north. This is a political question which may or may not be relevant to us every day, but this is an example of how the mass media has hidden something while emphasising something else. Following this election, women in Turkmenistan now cannot wear special nails, have to dress in specific ways, all the beauty surgeries are prohibited, taken away. Basically, all of the particular Westernization efforts that people appreciated are ideologically gone in the new Turkmenistan. So here we go again: hyper-generalised politics play a very serious role in human lives.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/15/turkmenistan-strongmans-son-wins-presidential-vote> The Guardian, 15.03.2022

EMT: *So in the future we would need to raise awareness and educate people to notice these mass media strategies?*

JV: Maybe the central way to educate is to propagate doubt. That is, every time when somebody makes a statement which is claimed to be very, very true and very, very important, use specific ways of doubting it. Rational dialogue through doubt. For example, you'll get a social media message of some kind. Instead of accepting 'Oh, that is it!', you say let us doubt what it is actually. Slow down the impact of this kind of social message, find out what is really behind it. So, this doubt may be the central way to overcome these kinds of impacts. Impacts are also oriented towards hyper generalised acceptance. The idea is "this must be right. Because it comes to me so quickly from that very important source." If a Hollywood film star sends a message that the particular as a film star is morally wrong. Why should I accept that? Even if I like that sender. I still don't need to accept it. You see in the present-day legal system, something that is changing in a very dangerous direction. In the old times, you were innocent until proven guilty. Nowadays, you are guilty until proven innocent, and you are guilty by the social media push. You're a sexual abuser in #metoo. You are politically wrong in any kind of political claim. You are corrupt. These messages may come at any time, and they are assumed to be true rather than to be proven. That reversal of this presumption of innocence is very dangerous in any society, because it basically makes it possible, not by governments, but actually by any special interest groups to say, 'Oh, this is wrong'. You have a number of examples of it in recent years, where this is happening. Corruption charges, sexuality charges. Doubt might be a central remedy to that problem. So how do you bring children in school to doubt the teacher? Or let's reverse it: a teacher who is oneself capable of saying to the pupils, you need to doubt what I'm saying to you. Sometimes in my lectures I tell the students directly, "Don't believe everything I'm saying". They find it difficult. I sometimes make statements which are absurd and they do not register that. In another sense, they are at the receivers' end, not co-constructing. If they co-construct with me, then they raise a question, 'Why do you say that? What is your base for it? I think differently. What do you think of my differences?'. That will be the negotiation about the doubt about the message. But this is extremely rare. That's one of the serious concerns about education. Where is it going? I repeat my, so many times heard story, about 'are we allowed to think this way?'. Who is the agent of allowing me to think the way I think? Very serious problem nowadays.

EMT: *Education was also a topic for one of the public lectures you gave here in Tartu⁵. Do you feel a mission with it?*

JV: No, it is not a mission. I am not a missionary, even though what I say in different topics may be interpreted as such. I'm really not a missionary, I am just contemplating how particular issues, for example, education, need change. The goal is not to criticise for the sake of criticism but to allow for possible alternatives. Of course, it might be utopian on my side, I recognise that, but maybe some aspect of it is doable. On a small scale I can do it with my students. On a macro scale, my nice little idea of the University of Antarctica⁶ is of course a utopia. The reason for this utopia is quite important: if our knowledge is reduced to the earning of certificates of (higher) education, then we are just certificate-holders, nothing more. The existing system of courses is in place, people take courses, get the certificates, people live happily ever after in some area of human society. If the focus is on young people to develop new knowledge, then the certificate is basically irrelevant. It is nice to have, but not necessary. People taking risks in developing knowledge beyond what is expected of them. The main question in the final exam for a master's thesis should be what have you contributed new to your own work? If this is an expected question, then people who are working on their master's thesis will start thinking about that early on. If this question comes as a surprise, then not. Quite a simple move, to ask the question what have you newly contributed.

EMT: *What have you newly contributed during your time here, and generally?*

JV: Starting from yesterday: unity of the director, actor and audience, that has developed in the last week more or less. Of course, the idea has been expressed before, but never elaborated. Secondly, what is new in my Tartu stay is exactly the effort to build beyond the cultural psychology that I had built before. All in all, if you look at what I have done, I think I have maybe two or three relevant ideas. Hyper-generalization is probably the most important one. The second one is the notion of a hierarchy of signs, and making it flexible and demolishable: not just a hierarchy in order to fix it. We build a hierarchy in order to unfix it. Nobody else thinks of hierarchy as demolishable. When social sciences talk about hierarchy, it is fixed, based on transitivity not intransitivity. Third, is the focus on the catalysis of causation in my psychological world. It's surprising to me that the notion of catalysis — that goes back to the 1830s and got special prominence in Tartu through Wilhelm Oswald who studied here and got the Nobel prize — this idea that has been dominant in chemistry, had not reached psychology until 2014 when we edited the very first volume on catalysis in psychology, and it still hasn't

⁵ <https://ut.ee/et/sisu/valiseesti-kulalisprofessori-jaan-valsineri-loengud-kevadsemestril>

⁶ Sustainable Futures for Higher Education: The Making of Knowledge Makers, Foreword: Utopia for Practice: The University of Antarctica Project, 2018

come very far. Psychology continues in these old mental models whereas chemistry has long gone beyond it. Biology, too. It's a chemical-biological model that I'm talking about.

EMT: *To go back to talking about the past, I was wondering, how did you first encounter semiotics?*

JV: Historically it goes back to the 1970s and my listening to one of Lotman's seminars. I was sitting in and not understanding anything. I saw Lotman walking around in Tartu. I was not personally acquainted, it was nice to see him walking around. I knew semiotics but I did not know much more. The actual move into the need to look semiotically maybe came somewhere in the end of the 1980s, definitely the 1990s, and it came together with the understanding that the centrality of human psychological functioning is in the construction of meanings. That led me to looking at semiotics in different forms, then gradually starting to integrate it into my own thinking, but not very quickly. I think that generally the focus on culture came in the 1990s, but it at first simply started on the anthropological side, looking at how different societies organise different functions of human development. This was the central focus of my quasi-textbook published in 1989, and then later 2000 (the so-called orange book⁷, which became the yellow book). I used it in my own teachings in the 1990s and also the 2000s when I left Clarke and would be increasingly dissatisfied with it [the "orange" book] so I am happy that I'm not using it anymore. That is more or less where the culture entered. Semiotics came with it, but theoretically actually only by 1998, I think. The Guided Mind [The Guided Mind: A Sociogenetic Approach to Personality] is filled with semiotics, and also of course the 2007 book "Culture in minds and societies". So, somewhere around that time, mid-1990s to mid-2000s, I became very much embedded in semiotics, and from there came the synthesis of irreversible time and the semiotic side. I still think that the 2007 "Culture in minds and societies"⁸ is probably the best I have written so far. The 2014 "Invitation to Cultural Psychology" which is now translated into Estonian⁹ is a strange book. It makes some nice presentations of the ideas, but it is not theoretically coherent. It is more of an effort to be as popular as I possibly can, which is not very much. It's readable, sometimes I even find it quite amusing if I look at it again, but the 2007 text is theoretically more concise. That means that the book that should now come out of the nine months in Tartu should be

⁷ Human Development and Culture: The Social Nature of Personality and Its Study, Lexington Books, 1989

⁸ <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/culture-in-minds-and-societies>

⁹ <https://kultuur.err.ee/1608338204/eesti-keeles-ilmus-jaan-valsineri-teos-teejuht-kultuuripsuhhologiasse> Eesti keeles ilmus Jaan Valsineri teos "Teejuht kultuuripsuhhologiasse", ERR 14.09.2021

even more concise, because it will be elaborating my own theoretical stance as of this year. That's a hope.

EMT: *Any collaboration plans with Tartu semioticians?*

JV: Some very concrete plans with you [the book of chapters by Tartu semiotics' students, "Explorations in Dynamic Semiosis"], also with Andreas Ventsel and Mari-Liis Madisson. They want me to join in an article, which I am happy to do, assuming I know something about the topic. Then, with Kalevi a number of possible joint writings. He is busy, and so am I, but hopefully the topics are worth it. I also have a number of plans with Tallinn people, my former students whom I am pushing all the time to do something new. They are busy teaching but they will try to do it. There are many Estonian possibilities and I would be happy to promote them as much as I can. Probably the best contribution I can make to the new generation in Estonian is exactly that push and guidance. And how to doubt the Estonian academic system. No plans with Tartu psychologists at all, somehow the contact is lost. I had quite active contact in the 1990s when I came back to the Department of Psychology a number of times for short courses. From the early 2000s this has not happened, I have been going to Tallinn instead. Depends on where the particular department is heading. At the department of semiotics I feel much more at home. I feel openness, and at the same time many confusions. Openness and confusion go hand in hand. Better than closedness and no confusions.

EMT: *It's in the move, dynamic. While being here and observing the department to some extent, do you have any recommendations or proposals?*

JV: I don't understand very well how it works. I understand there is an effort to integrate the department through method—semiotics. From my point of view, this is a very difficult task. The same has happened in psychology with qualitative methods. It is developing to be increasingly popular, they are becoming almost equal to quantitative methods worldwide. Mixed methods. When we start looking at it, there are two problems. One is that the method becomes specified as categories: you use phenomenological method, you use a dialogical method, narrative method and so on. A more general issue of what these methods can access at all is lost. This is why I have been insisting on my methodology cycle¹⁰ for 25 years now. Second problem is that the method is very much empirical, but the value of semiotics could actually be in developing the theoretical side.

¹⁰ See for example: Needed for cultural psychology: Methodology in a new key. *Culture & Psychology* 20(1): 3-30, 2014, full text available here: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270599204_Needed_for_cultural_psychology_Met hodology_in_a_new_key

Whichever version you take—Peircian version, Saussurean version, Lotman version. These are all—especially Lotman—a quintessence of integration of different ideas from different sources. Literary scholarship, chemistry, Prigogine and cybernetics. Over the decades of his [Juri Lotman's] work he has consistently worked on literature but at the same time putting, theoretically, together all the different impacts from different areas. That is in itself an extremely important synthesis. Some of the results may be difficult to elaborate, some of them are easy to develop. But it's clearly an open possibility for further development, and this is right here, revered in the semiotics department as we took pictures with Lotman and me on the third-floor corridor [see photo below]. Especially this year there is a very strong Lotman following¹¹. Beyond the following should be the Lotman developing—developing some of Lotman's ideas further. Semiosphere is one of them which could be developed, and of course, explosion. And in what area? It can be literature, it can be something else. It is nice to see that Lotman is not dead. It is open for questions whether he is developed yet, that I don't know. Everything depends on the working conditions, whether and how the university supports semiotics.

¹¹ 2022 marks the centenary of the birth of Juri Lotman (1922-1993). <https://jurilotman.ee/en/>